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Calling and career competencies among Romanian students: the mediating role of career adaptability

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Abstract

Finding meaning in work and developing career competencies needed for professional success has acquired increased interest in the last decades. The most important task in emerging adults became finding a calling in their career that is essential for adaptability and career self-management. This study examined the relation between calling, career adaptability and career competencies among 458 Romanian university students. The mediation role of career adaptability on the relation between calling and career competencies was tested. The relation between calling and career competencies was partially mediated by career adaptability. Implications for further research and emerging adults' career counseling are discussed.

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1. Theoretical background

1.1 Introduction

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In the beginning of the 21st century, a new social work engagement emerged and brought new challenges and questions regarding the nature of work and careers and the role of individuals in their own professional development. In a society where careers became less predictable, the transitions are frequent and difficult, developing new competencies and promoting flexibility more than stability creates new and different opportunities (Savickas, 2005). Also, finding meaning in work became a central task for developing a successful career and for increasing well-being (Duffy & Selacek, 2007; Peterson et al., 2009).

Due to the fact that most people spend more than 1/3 of their time engaging in professional activities, career is an important part of the human experience. Consequently, people try to find meaning in career and to set work goals that are personally significant for them. With an accent on adaptability and future-oriented self-management processes, new approaches on career emerged.

The theoretical framework underlying our study is the Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2002). CCT defines career as a process in which individuals impose personal meanings on their vocational choices, occupational transitions, and future aspirations. From a CCT perspective, career calling is a dynamic construct (Elangovan et al., 2010) which develops through the lifespan, before an individual starts working. Calling facilitates the adaptation to life events and is related to many internal and external factors relevant for career objective and subjective success. Career calling is concordant with identifying strong personal purposes and it is manifested in future actions, cognitions and emotions that are relevant for the management of personal career development purposes.

1.2 Calling, career adaptability and career competencies

In the last decades, research on calling increased, with a focus on the relation of calling with career development outcomes. The conceptualization of calling emphasizes the importance of perceived meaning in work and career, as a sense of higher purpose, meaningful to oneself and to the larger community (Dik & Duffy, 2009). In this study, we define calling as “the belief that one's career is a central part of a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life and is used to help others or advance the greater good in some fashion” (Duffy & Dik, 2013, p. 429). Most of the research in the field emphasizes the relevance of calling in emerging adults for developing a purpose centered view about their career and professional development. Two recent studies show that a high percent of students endorse a calling in career (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007; Dumulescu, Opre, & Buzgar, 2015) and report calling as being central to their view about career. Moreover, other recent studies concluded that among college students, feeling a calling is linked to positive career variables like vocational self-clarity, career maturity (Duffy, Allan, & Dik, 2011; Duffy & Dik, 2013).

However, the relation of calling and career adaptability was investigated only in few studies. Career adaptability is an important variable for students' career development and is defined as “a psychological construct that denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks of vocational development” (Savickas, 2002, p. 156). Thus, adaptability is a meta-competence which involves being future oriented and anticipating new career task (concern), taking responsibility for career development (control), exploring career opportunities (curiosity) and self-efficacy beliefs in realizing career goals (confidence) and thus helping people manage career transitions (Savickas, 2005). From our knowledge, only two studies have examined the relation of calling and career adaptability (Guo et al., 2014; Praskova, Hood, & Creed, 2014), finding a strong relation between calling and career adaptability. Due to the importance of calling and career adaptability for students, it is very likely that the second variable acts like an explicative mechanism on the relation of calling and other career development variables, as career competencies. Career competencies are defined as “knowledge, skills, and abilities central to career development, which can be influenced and developed by the individual” (Akkermans et. al, 2013). Two important categories of career competencies are the communicative career competencies and behavioral ones. Communicative competencies pertain to being able to effectively communicate with significant others to improve one's chances of career success. The two communicative career competencies are networking, defined as being aware of the presence and professional value of an individual network, and the ability to expand career network; and

self-profiling, defined as presenting personal knowledge, abilities and skills to labor market. Behavioral competencies focus on being able to actually shape one's career by proactively taking action. Work exploration is an important behavioral competence and is defined as exploring and searching for career-related opportunities. (Akkermans et.al, 2013).

One important predictor of career competencies is career motivation, seen as a positive attitude and intention with regard to one's career (Millar & Shevlin, 2003; Van Hooft & De Jong, 2009). On the other hand, a high score on career motivation predicts a higher score on both objective and subjective career success (Day & Allen, 2004). Based on these findings, we expected that career calling would be positively related to career competencies. Also, there are some studies linking career calling with observed behaviors, and it seems that career proactive attitude (Elangovan et al, 2010) and behaviors (Hirschi, 2011) are related to a sense of calling. More, in CCT, career adaptability is viewed as self-regulatory, psychosocial resource that shapes actions aimed at achieving adaptation goals (Savickas et. al, 2012).

Given this background, research on the relations between a purpose-centered view about career, the use of self-regulatory resources and career related competencies carries important implications in facilitating emerging adult's career development in the Romanian context. To further examine the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between calling, career adaptability and career competencies, we argue that career adaptability enables individuals to better prepare themselves for the profession. A high level of calling will further drive individuals' efforts for using adaptability resources which, in turn, will facilitate the process of developing and putting in action the career competencies.

Thus, building from previous studies, the aim of this study is to examine the relation between calling, career adaptability and three career competencies (networking, self-profiling, work-exploration). We hypothesize that career adaptability will partially mediate the relation between calling and career competencies.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Sample

Participants were 458 undergraduate and graduate students from three Romanian universities. The participants were mainly females 70.6 % female, 29.4% male, $M=21.92$, $SD=4.5$. Regarding the field of study, 67% are studying social sciences, 13.4% humanities and 19.6% technical and life sciences.

2.2 Procedure

The participants were recruited through announcements in lectures, through the Facebook groups. Questionnaires were administered in class, at the end of the second semester and online through Google.docs forms. Participation was voluntary. Students didn't receive any rewards for filling in the forms.

2.3 Measures:

We used the following instruments:

The Multidimensional Calling Measure (MCM; Hagmaier & Abele, 2012)

Calling was assessed with the Multidimensional Calling Measure. MCM is a three-factorial scale. The response scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. This measure consists of three subscales with 3 items each: (a) transcendent guiding force (TGF), (b) sense and meaning and value-driven behavior (SMVB), and (c) identification and person-environment-fit (IP). Sample items are "I follow an inner call that guides me on my career path" (TGF), "My job helps to make the world a better place" (SMVB), and "Doing my job, I can realize my full potential" (IP). A global score assessing calling is also constructed. The reliabilities of the English scales are: Cronbach's α : MCM-TGF $\alpha= .83$, MCM-SMVB $\alpha= .85$, MCM-IP $\alpha= .88$).

Career Adaptability Scale (CAAS; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

The students' career adaptability was assessed using the Career Adaptabilities Scale (CAAS) (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The CAAS is comprised of 24 items and four subscales: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Each subscale consists of six items, and students responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not strong”) to 5 (“strongest”). Items include ‘How strongly you have developed each of the following abilities: ‘Performing tasks efficiently’” and “Working up to my ability.” In the original validation study, internal consistency reliabilities for the CAAS subscales ranged from $\alpha = .75$ to $\alpha = .85$, and the internal consistency reliability for the total CAAS scale was $\alpha = .92$ (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Career Competencies Questionnaire (CCQ; Akkermans J., Brenninkmeijer, V., Huibers, M., & Blonk, R.W.B, 2013)

Career competencies were assessed with three subscales from Career Competencies Questionnaire: work exploration, self-profiling and networking. CCQ is a 21-item Career Competencies Questionnaire (CCQ; Akkermans et al., 2013). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). networking was measured with 4 items (e.g., “I know how to ask for advice from members of my network”; $\alpha = .87$), self-profiling was measured with 3 items (e.g., “can clearly show others what my strengths are in my work”; $\alpha = .86$), work exploration was measured with 3 items (e.g., “I can actively search for the developments in my area of work”; $\alpha = .86$). The participants were instructed to respond to CCQ items as they performed or did not performed the action in the last 6 month.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive results for major study variables

Data analysis supported the first hypothesis and showed significant positive relations between calling in career, career adaptability dimensions and career competencies. The means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) for all scales used are reported in Table 1. All scales showed good internal consistency, Cronbach's alphas were above .80 (see Table 1). Regarding the correlations among variables, calling showed the strongest relation with career adaptability ($r = .046$) and with networking ($r = .046$). Also, calling was positively related with work exploration ($r = .30$) and self-profiling ($r = .33$). A strong correlation was also found between career adaptability and networking ($r = .65$) and self-profiling ($r = .50$) and a moderate one between career adaptability and work-exploration ($r = .37$). All correlations were significant at $p < .001$.

Table 1

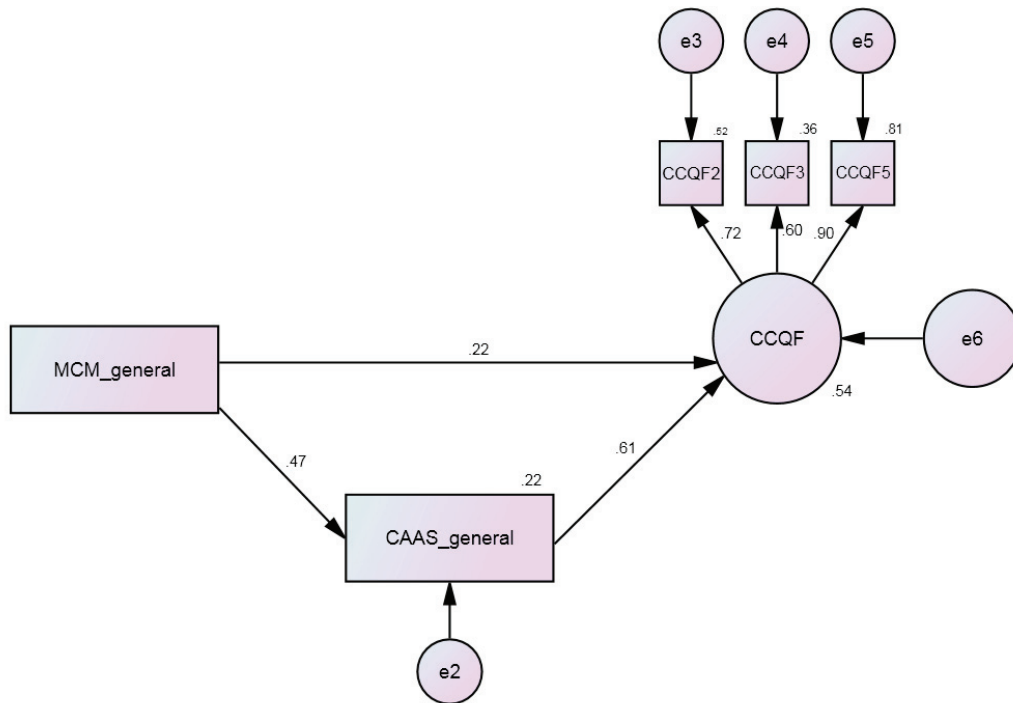
	1	2	3	4	5
1 MCM_general	.88				
2 CAAS_general	.467**	.87			
3 CCQF2_self_profiling	.335**	.503**	.89		
4 CCQF3_work_exploration	.304**	.377**	.507**	.82	
5 CCQF5_networking	.466**	.654**	.641**	.535**	.88
Mean	39.99	16.87	3.87	3.66	3.86
Standard deviation	7.71	2.14	.72	.84	.71

** significant at a p level < .001

Model specification – To further examine the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between calling, career adaptability and career competencies, we specified a descriptive model with career adaptability mediating the relation between calling and career competencies. Building from career construction theory, we propose that calling

enable the use of adaptability resources which in turn enhance the career competencies use. (see Figure 1 for model specification).

Figure 1. Model specification



3.2 Test of the hypothesized model

Given that the model specification resulted in a full regression SEM model, the fit with the covariance matrix was performed in two phases: in the first phase, the fit of the measurement model was analyzed and then, the whole model was analyzed. The specified measurement model contains only three reflective indicators, as a result it is just identified. In order to obtain an over-identified measurement model we constrained the unique variance of Self-profiling and Networking scales to equality, given that their item total correlation was in the same range. The χ^2 for the measurement model was 1.026 (df = 1, p = .311), $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.026$, CFI = .99, GFI = .99, SRMR = .009, and RMSEA = .008. The non-significant p value indicated consistencies between the model and the covariance data. All the estimated factor loadings were significant ($p < .01$) their magnitude ranging between .65 and .8 (see table 2).

Table 2

			Standardized Regression weights	Regression weights	S.E.	C.R.	<i>P</i>
CCQF2 (self-profiling)	<---	CCQF	.805	1.028	.058	17.703	0.001
CCQF3 (work exploration)	<---	CCQF	.650	.968	.077	12.642	0.001
CCQF5 (networking)	<---	CCQF	.797	1.000	-	-	-

Regarding the structural model, the computed χ^2 was 13.85 (df = 4, p = .008), χ^2/df = 3.464, CFI = .98, GFI = .98, SRMR = .025, and RMSEA = .076. A significant p value usually is interpreted as a result of possible inconsistencies between the model and the covariance data. The χ^2 is the only fit measure which is indicating the misfit of the model, while the rest of the indicator are above/below the established cut-offs, indicating a good fit of the structural model. Ignoring χ^2 is justified given that chi square test values are influenced by large sample size, signalling as significant minor discrepancies between the implied and the sample covariance matrices.

3.3. Effect estimates

Only standardized effects of coefficients in the final model are discussed here (Fig. 3 and Table 3). All path estimates were significant (p < .05) and in the hypothesized direction. Career adaptability mediated the relationship between calling and adaptive behaviors. Calling had a significant positive direct effect (b = .46) on career adaptability which in turn had a significant direct effect on career competencies (b=.60) More than a half (.54) of the variance in career competencies was explained by the model.

Table 3

			Standardized Regression Weights	Regression Weights	S.E.	Bootstrap 95 CI	C.R.	<i>P</i>
Direct effects								
CAAS	<---	MCM	.467	.130	.012	.110, .151	10.97	0.001
CCQF	<---	MCM	.223	.015	.003	.011, .021	5.03	0.001
CCQF	<---	CAAS	.606	.148	.013	.125, .179	11.49	0.001
Indirect effects								
CCQF	<---	MCM	.283	.019	.002	.015, .023	9.5	.008
CCQF5 (networking)	<---	MCM	.457	.042	.004	.034, .049	10.5	.015
CCQF3 (work exploration)	<---	MCM	.305	.033	.005	.027, .042	6.6	.007
CCQF2 (self-profiling)	<---	MCM	.365	.034	.004	.029, .041	8.5	.005

CAAS –career adaptability; MCM- calling; CCQF5-networking; CCQF3-work-exploration; CCQF2-self-profiling

4. Discussions and conclusions

The results of mediation analysis supported the hypothesis that career adaptability partially mediates the path between calling in career and career competencies (work exploration, self-profiling and networking). The finding that career adaptability served as a significant mediator of calling and career competencies relation indicates that

part of the reason students with calling report career competencies was due to the resources of career adaptability. Our results showed that students with a sense of calling have more communicative and behavioral career competencies and this relation may be partially explained by the meta-competence of career adaptability. Consistently with previous findings (Praskova et. al, 2014), students with high level of calling develop a more responsible and future-oriented perspective which enables them to acquire personal competencies to effectively manage their career. More specific, students perceiving their career as calling are more able to expand their career network, communicate about their competencies and explore more actively the career opportunities, in part because they use their career adaptability psychosocial resources (confidence, curiosity, control, concern).

From a theoretical point of view, our study extends the previous research on calling by testing its correlates and its effects on career competences; calling beliefs motivates students to use resources of adaptability which contribute to the development of relevant career competence to achieve their professional goals (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011).

The findings of the current study provide guidance for career counselling practices as well. The positive role of career adaptability and calling on career competencies revealed in this study suggests that they can be important instruments in putting career competencies in action. Calling perceptions and career adaptabilities resources can be used in counselling process to help students gain insights about their career competencies and develop those competencies through voluntary work or field experiences. The important link between the construct investigated in this study may be informative for helping students become more self-directed in their career.

Undoubtedly, someone's career competencies development depends on the perceived meaning of career and the use of career adaptability resources. Therefore, it is suggested that education institutions should enhance students' employability skills through the implementation of a career strategy in the curriculum, and also the implementation of co-curricular activities in order that people discover and take advantage of the development opportunities in a timely manner (Weng & McElroy, 2010) and effectively implement their calling in future career settings.

5. Limitations and future directions

The results of this study need to be addressed in the light of some assumed limitations. First, the study was cross-sectional and causal relations could not be determined and it limits the interpretation of indirect relationships. Further longitudinally studies should examine the causal relations between variables. Second, all of the measures were self-report measures and the sample consisted mostly of women. We tried to minimize this problem by reducing participants' evaluation apprehension through emphasizing there were no right or wrong answers. Moreover, it can be argued that constructs such as career adaptability, calling are impossible to measure in any other way than by self-reports (Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2004). Third, although the position of our variables in the model was based on the research literature (Praskova et al., 2014), future research is needed in order to generalize the findings about the relations that were established.

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